The Educational Thoughts of Swami Vivekananda: A Review

Sukriti Ghosal*

This year we are celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), one of the great 19th century pathfinders of India. Ramakrishna and Vivekananda- like *guru*, like disciple. Ramakrishna was called '*paramaham?sa*', one who could filter milk from water (the essentials of life from its inessentials), as ducks are believed to be capable of doing. The literal meaning of the word Vivekananda is one who delights in *viveka*, the mental faculty that enables man to tell chalk from cheese. It is interesting to note how the name itself binds the worthy disciple to his great master. Himself a monk, Vivekananda declines to have any faith in a God who promises man 'eternal bliss in heaven' but cannot give him half a loaf in this world (150). Among the Indian saints it is Vivekananda who advocates renunciation not for *moksa* or liberation of one's soul from the eternal cycle of existence, but for commitment to social welfare. He condemns the Indian social ethos, which on the one hand boasts of *advaita* (non-dualism) on the other discriminates against the so-called untouchable on grounds of the 'lowness' of their birth. He had firm moorings in oriental culture, yet he had the broadness to welcome all that is worth borrowing from the west. No wonder that today, over a century after his death, we still try to enrich ourselves with the gems of Vivekananda's thoughts.

Vivekananda is valued more as a spiritualist than as an educationist. But if we attentively study the writings and lectures of Vivekananda we will find that his views on education are products of original reflection. Incidentally, as a student Narendranath Dutta, the name he held before he became a *sannyasi*, is known to have been extraordinarily meritorious. According to his teacher William Hastie of Scottish Church College he was 'a genius'. There are a number of apocryphal anecdotes about his memory and retentive power. But it is a fact that in 1893 Prof. John Henry Wright of Harvard University recommended Vivekananda for participation in World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago with the remark: "Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together." After his international recognition through Chicago address Swamiji returned to India and in 1897 set up Ramakrishna Mission, which even today is committed *inter alia* to the noble task of spreading the light of education. Vivekananda rightly felt that education is the best tool for social reform and deeply reflected on how to make it meaningful for the people of his beloved country.

Swamiji who describes religion as 'the manifestation of the divinity already in man' defines education as 'the manifestation of the perfection already in man' (55). According to him, knowledge is inherent in man, not acquired from external sources. Like sparks in a flint, knowledge is potentially there in human mind. The stimulus of education causes the friction that ignites the fire of knowledge. It is the unfolding of the petals of one's own mind. So 'what a man learns is really what he "discovers", by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge' (54). According to Vivekananda, the very essence of education is 'concentration of mind' rather than accumulation of facts: 'Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain' (56). Vivekananda is skeptical about the system of education where the learner's mind gets jam-packed with information without having any space for independent thinking. He clears up all confusing misconception in this regard with a witty remark: "If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages of the world (56). Regrettably, turning our back upon the instruction of this great master even today we treat innocent learners as nothing better than a vessel to be stuffed with cartload of facts with little scope for exploring their hidden potentials.

Vivekananda holds that the greatest value of education consists in its power to induce the spirit of revolt against the condition into which man has been thrust by nature. Education nurtures the consciousness that distinguishes a being from a machine, which 'never wishes to transgress law' (55). In other words, it is education that teaches man to revolt against a given system without accepting it, however hostile, as natural. So whatever chokes the will by force and thereby reduces man to the state of a machine is not education in the true sense of the word. Paradoxically, the same education is also required to regulate and restrain the wild and wanton power of the will: 'The training by which the current and expression of will are brought

*Principal, MUC Women's College, Burdwan-713104 West Bengal

under control and become fruitful is called education' (55). What Vivekananda means here is that education should help man outgrow his human imperfections, on the one hand by inspiring him to assert his will over his environment, on the other by putting a brake on his random volition.

Like Vidyasagar, Vivekananda also stresses the importance of women education. He maintains that society cannot attain desirable progress without the spread of literacy among women. With a brilliant flight metaphor Vivekananda explains the point about how female illiteracy retards the progress of a society: 'It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing' (69). Indeed, women will be truly empowered to take decisions about themselves only when they get adequately educated: 'Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them' (71). In so far as child-education is concerned, Swamiji wants education to be a joyous experience for children, not a burden that impedes the efflorescence of their mind. At every step the learner is to face the thrill of a new question and move forward by negotiating it— a system technically called the heuristic method of learning. Vivekananda explains the idea with an image of tending a sapling: 'You cannot teach a child any more than you can grow a plant'. Since education is a manifestation from within, it develops its own nature and the teacher can at best 'only take away constraints': " Hands off! as I always say, and everything will be right. That is, our duty is to clear the way' (56). Anticipating the much acclaimed, modern, student-cetred method of learning where the teacher plays the role of a facilitator, Vivekananda asks the teacher to come down to the level of the learner and 'give him a push upwards'. So there should be least intervention and the ideal teacher should consciously under-teach so that the learners get ample scope for learning themselves: 'No one can teach anybody. The teacher spoils everything by thinking that he is teaching'(56).

A great spokesman of social justice, Vivekananda criticizes the system where access to education gets restricted: 'The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land ... among a handful of men' (37). Quality without quantity is an unacceptable alternative to Vivekananda. Vivekananda pleads for universal access and faults the exclusionist attitude of people who are unwilling to share their knowledge. He strongly condemns the unjust system where the downtrodden masses pay for the education of the upper class but in return only 'get kicks' (30). Vivekananda exhorts the educated people to shoulder the responsibility of spreading literacy among their illiterate countrymen. Without mincing his words he says: 'so long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them' (150). While the caste based Indian society has privileged the upper caste, generations of deprivation have awfully weakened the intellectual fibre of the lower caste. So social justice is to be ensured by paying more attention to the education of the so-called lower castes: 'If the son of a Brahmin needs one teacher, that of a *can?d?âla* needs ten' (65). Another observation of Vivekananda on the question of education of the masses is of profound significance. In case the poor villagers do not go to schools set up for them, it is advisable that the school should go to their door step: 'If the mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed should go to the mountain' (64). It's a pity that despite the Right to Education act, this noble idea is yet to be translated into action.

For Vivekananda education does not stop at getting a degree but is really a lifelong learning process, for 'the man who says he has nothing more to learn is already at his last gasp'. He disapproves of the education that does not equip the masses for the struggle for life: 'Real education is that which enables one to stand on one's own legs' (56). This does not mean just getting a job but being confident and self-reliant by banking upon one's own potentials. No wonder that unlike most of his contemporary thinkers Vivekananda recognizes the value of technical education: 'we need technical education and all else that may develop industries so that men, instead of seeking service, may earn enough to provide for themselves' (39).

It would be wrong to claim that all the thoughts of Vivekananda on education are wholly appropriate to our times. Some of these have over the years lost relevance. For example, Vivekananda seems to be a spokesman of patriarchy when he asks women to model their life on Sita, the archetype of devoted wife idealized for her patient suffering. Moreover, although today we favour secular, liberal education, Vivekananda looks upon 'religion as the innermost core of education' (57). He believes that education should have a spiritual matrix, for it must ultimately lead to the awakening of the *Brahman* dormant in one's spirit: 'Through

education comes faith in one's self and through faith in one's own self the inherent Brahman is waking up in them' (37). But we must not lose sight of the fact that Vivekananda insists on the primacy of social transformation through education without which all endeavour for spiritual transformation will be a futile exercise: '... even for social reform, the first duty is to educate the people, and you will have to wait till that time comes' (37). As a great thinker Vivekananda also takes cognizance of the fact that as Indians are religious by nature, the aim of educating the people may be frustrated if education and religion are posited against each other as rivals. He, therefore, prudently articulates a unique motto: 'Elevation of the masses without injuring their religion' (29), an ideal about educating the masses without hurting their religious feelings. It is worth pointing out here that himself a Hindu monk, in this mission of enlightenment Vivekananda never asks us to have regards for the religious faith exclusively of the Hindus. An equal regard is to be shown to the religious sentiment of all the communities. The schools and colleges in India run by Ramakrishna Mission have shown phenomenal success in the mission of enlightening the people of the country. Is it because they adhere to the course recommended by Vivekananda? It is time we pondered over the trade-secret of these centers of excellence.

Notes and References

Quotations from *My India: The India Eternal* by Swami Vivekananda published by Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 1993(rpt. 2008)—page number given within bracket. ❑

(*contd. from pg.27*)

Conclusion

So, in the short as well as long run it becomes extremely important that we take immediate measures for preservation of our cultural heritage through a mutually-understanding and amicable manner.

Culture is the ultimate identity of an individual person and also for a community, a nation or a society at a bigger level. If we can't protect it it would render us identity-less and reduce us to mere human beings without any entity that we can call our own.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said that the doors and windows of our houses must not be kept closed always so that winds from outside can enter them. However, the foundations of the houses must be so strong to withstand any attempt at breaking down our houses or sweeping them totally with some alien culture. This saying can be interpreted in this way that we must keep the windows of our minds open for interacting with cultures from outside but at the same time our foundations must be strong enough to resist a total conversion into a new culture and work for a mutually-enjoyable and amicable cultural assimilation.

Nowadays, things have become much convenient in terms of preservation efforts. This is so because today we have technologies including digital microfilming with state-of-the-art advancement that has made preservation of cultural ethos a far delightful job.

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